

STEPHEN PROTHERO

Is America's Jesus Good for the Jews?

**THE 2005 SWIG LECTURE
SEPTEMBER 22, 2005**

**THE SWIG JUDAIC STUDIES PROGRAM
AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO**

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Is America's Jesus Good for the Jews?

STEPHEN PROTHERO

"Is America's Jesus good for the Jews?" Great question. I wish I had thought of it myself. I did not. It was suggested to me by the director of the Swig Judaic Studies Program, Professor Andrew Heinze, and I thank him both for the kind invitation and for the provocative question.

To answer that question, we need to know three things. We need to know, first, just who this American Jesus is. Second, we need to see what Jews in America have seen in that Jesus—how they have affirmed or resisted Christian reconstructions of him, or come up with alternatives of their own. Third, we need to evaluate the impact the American Jesus has had (and is having) on American Judaism. Today I will take each of these matters in turn.

THREE JESUSES

Before launching into my version of the story of America's Jesus, I need to make plain precisely what I mean (and do not mean) by the term American Jesus. There are in my view three main ways to think about Jesus today: the Christ of faith, the historical Jesus, and the cultural Jesus.

As you know, Jesus is often referred to as "Jesus Christ," as if Jesus were his first name and Christ his surname. But "Christ," of course, is a theological category—from the Greek word *kristos*, for messiah. So to call Jesus "Christ" is not simply to call him by his name. It is to say something about him—something theological. More specifically, it is to affirm that this person named Jesus was the long-expected messiah of the Jews. It is also to invite Christological controversies about Jesus' place inside the Trinity alongside the Father and the Holy Spirit, the hypostatic union of his divine and human natures, and the meanings of related appellations such as Son of God and Son of Man. In so doing, we evoke the Jesus of the churches (and, I might add, of some Hindu communities who also revere Jesus as a "Christ"). But neither this Christ of faith nor the Christological questions he surfaces are my subject for today.

A second way of thinking about Jesus is more historical and less theological. The topic here is the historical Jesus of the Jesus Seminar and other "Jesus quests." The central question is "Who was Jesus of Nazareth?" Was he a rabbi? A revolutionary? Why did he die? For what did he live? These are purely historical questions (though not, I might add, without theological import). But neither are they my questions for today.

In my research, I ignore entirely both the Christ of faith and the historical Jesus. My subject instead is a third option: the cultural Jesus. Here the question is not "Was Jesus the Messiah?" or "Who was Jesus of Nazareth?" but "Who have people taken Jesus to be?" This is a historical rather than a theological question. And it distinguishes itself from the central question of the Jesus quests by focusing not on the ancient Jesus but on his modern transmigrations and transfigurations. Questions about this modern Jesus can, of course, be asked of many different cultures. One could investigate the French Jesus or the South African Jesus. I have chosen to explore the American Jesus—Jesus as he has appeared in the American imagination.

AMERICAN JESUS

The most obvious observation to make about this American Jesus is that he is not one but many. The New Testament Book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). That may be true of the Christ of faith, but the American Jesus is many and malleable. The friendly Jesus who abided in the hearts of Victorian evangelicals would scarcely have been recognized by the stern Puritan divines of colonial Massachusetts, and there is a world of difference today between the Elder Brother of Mormonism and the Black Moses of the black church. At least in the United States, Jesus has stood not on some unchanging rock of ages, but on the shifting sands of economic circumstances, political calculations, and cultural trends. Like the apostle Paul, who, according to 1 Corinthians 9:22, wrote that he had become "all things to all men" so that he "might by all means save some," the American Jesus has been something of a chameleon. Christians have depicted him as black and white, male and female, a socialist and a capitalist, a pacifist and a warrior, a Ku Klux Klansman and a civil rights agitator.

This American Jesus has not been solely a Christian concern, however. To be sure, most American conceptions of him have been produced and consumed by Christians. But the power of Christians to put Jesus on the national agenda has compelled Americans of all faiths to weigh in on him, and the authority of the First Amendment has emboldened non-Christians to throw around whatever weight they have. The New Testament scholar Samuel Sandmel once observed that "no Jew breathing the free air of America could refrain from coming to grips in some way with Christianity and with Jesus."¹ But American Jews have not been alone. Atheists and agnostics, Black Muslims and white Buddhists have also reckoned with America (and with their own identities) by wrestling with Jesus. Moreover, outside the nation's churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples, the American Jesus has insinuated himself into supposedly secular venues, including television and the movies. In the process, he has become an athlete and an aesthete, a polygamist and a celibate, an advertising man and a mountaineer, a Hindu deity and a Buddha-to-be.

All this is to say that Jesus has an American history. This history—this American life—can be told in many ways. I tell it as a series of liberations, whereby Jesus is grad-

ually freed from constraints that shackle him: first, to Calvinism; second, to the Christian creeds; third, to the Bible; and, finally, to Christianity itself.

A key figure for me in this story is Thomas Jefferson, who takes a tack on Jesus that will later be traversed by many of America's greatest rabbis. Jefferson, of course, was denounced during his lifetime—and especially during the bitter presidential election campaign of 1800—as an infidel. But he was actually an extremely religious man. In fact, he was likely (after John Adams) the president most interested in Christian theology. Jefferson was not a Christian, of course. But he was a partisan of Jesus.

In fact, he loved Jesus so much that he could not stand to see his hero mouthing sayings in the Bible he knew Jesus never would have uttered—lunacies about casting out demons or turning water into wine. So on January 20, 1804, he ordered two copies of the King James version of the New Testament from a Philadelphia bookseller. Later that winter, he devoted a few nights in the White House to cutting and pasting a New Testament of his own. He excised from his text the superstitious mumbo-jumbo he was convinced Jesus never said, then pasted into octavo sheets—the Jefferson Bible, we call it today—his own record of Jesus the rational sage. Gone were the miracles and all legends concerning Jesus' virgin birth and his resurrection and ascension—“mysticisms, fancies and falsehoods,” Jefferson called them.² What survived were Jesus’ moral sayings, which the Man from Monticello described elsewhere as “more pure, correct and sublime than those of the antient [sic] philosophers.”³

Jefferson’s genius was his ability to imagine Jesus quite apart from Christianity. It must have been tempting for him to cede to Christians the right to define their central symbol, then to grant to himself a simple “yes” or “no” vote—for or against their Christ. And if Jefferson had yielded to that temptation he would have rejected not only Christianity but also Jesus. But Jefferson did not yield. He insisted on the right to define Jesus for himself. And so Jesus emerged—at least in Jefferson’s imagination—as “the most perfect model of Republicanism in the Universe”, a great moral teacher who spread the gospel of liberty, fraternity, and equality across ancient Palestine and, via his Enlightenment apostles, in the modern world.⁴

In religion, as in politics, Jefferson was in many respects years ahead of his time; few Americans in the early Republic were ready for a post-Christian Jesus. The theological challenge at the time was to extricate Jesus from the Calvinist theology of Puritan ministers. In the world according to the Christian theology that dominated the colonies and the early Republic—the theology of the Protestant reformer John Calvin, that is—Jesus had very little to do. God the Father was the dominant figure of the Trinity. So when Puritans and early Americans thought of God, they thought first and foremost of God the Father—the Creator and Lawgiver and Judge—and they responded to him more with fear than with love. Puritan sermons and the speeches of early American politicians quoted from the Old Testament more than the New. This was a God-fearing rather than a Jesus-loving faith.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, however, and especially around the time of the revivals of the Second Great Awakening of the 1830s, a new form of American Christianity emerged. Evangelicalism shared with Puritanism a conviction that the Bible was the Word of God and that a "new birth" of sorts was necessary for salvation. But most evangelicals gave up on the harshest terms of Calvinist theology, including infant damnation and double predestination (a theology that had God consigning human beings to heaven and hell even before they were born). Perhaps most important, evangelicals turned their attentions from the First Person of the Trinity to the Second—from God the Father to God the Son. Before the rise of evangelicalism, Jesus had been a minor figure in American churches, little more than an abstract theological sign. Yes, Jesus had dutifully done his Father's bidding by taking on human form and suffering and dying for our sins. But he was not really an object of worship, and Americans thought surprisingly little about who he was or what he might do about this or that. With the rise of evangelicalism, Christianity was transformed from a God-fearing to a Jesus-loving faith. This transformation—in my book I call it the "real revolution" in nineteenth-century American religion—allowed Jesus to emerge as a personality on the American scene, setting him on a course that would eventually transform him, first, into a celebrity and, later, into a national icon.⁵

After this liberation from Calvinism, Jesus was liberated from the creeds. Previously, American Christians had understood Jesus largely in light of the traditional dogmatic formulas of the creeds, most notably the Nicene Creed, which affirmed that Jesus was somehow both "true God of true God" and "incarnate of the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary." In the early nineteenth century, however, some evangelicals—inspired by the emphasis of the Protestant Reformation on *sola scriptura* (scripture alone)—began to question the importance of such creeds, which they saw (unlike the Bible) as flawed human creations. As a result, the American Jesus did not need to conform to the ancient formulas of accepted dogmas; he was increasingly free to become his own man.

Next, Jesus was liberated from the Bible. Over the course of the nineteenth century, a series of shocks caused many American Christians to question the divine inspiration of the Bible. Biblical criticism, the new geology, evolutionary theory, and advances in comparative religion called into question old readings of the Bible, and old assurances about its infallibility. There were many responses to these shocks, but the most important for our purposes was an increased reliance on Jesus as the ultimate Christian authority. While prior generations had rallied around the slogan of *sola scriptura*, Christians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rallied around the slogan of *solus Jesus*: Jesus alone. Christianity was called that for a reason, they argued. It is Jesus we worship, they said, not the Bible. The alternative was bibliolatry.

The last of these four historic liberations of Jesus was prefigured by Jefferson, who, as I have said, had the audacity to distinguish sharply between Christianity and Jesus—to say no to the former and yes to the latter. And it was carried forth powerfully by

American Jews, more specifically by nineteenth-century Reform rabbis, who, like Jefferson, created Jesus in their own image, quite apart from the constraints of the Christian tradition. Later, Hindus and Buddhists also got into the act, arguing (as Jefferson and these Reform rabbis did earlier) that Jesus was not a Christian. He was instead a Hindu avatar (a “descent” of divinity into human form and human history) or a Buddhist bodhisattva (an “enlightenment being” dedicated to alleviating human suffering).

Such is one story of the American Jesus—a story of his gradual liberation from Calvinism, the creeds, the Bible and, eventually, Christianity itself.

Mixed into this story are a host of more specific American Jesuses—the personalities who appear once Jesus no longer has to answer to Calvin, or to the Council of Nicea, or to the Gospel of John. There is, for example, the feminine Jesus of the Victorian period—the Sweet Savior who takes children on his lap and listens to the sorrows of women. Or the masculine Jesus of the Progressive Era—the militaristic Redeemer of Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders, and of the baseball evangelist Billy Sunday, who called Jesus “the greatest scrapper that ever lived.”⁶ There is, in addition, the Mormon Jesus and the Catholic Jesus, the feminist Jesus and the chauvinist Jesus, gay Jesus and straight Jesus. My Jesus and yours.

In his conclusion to *Jesus Through the Centuries* (1985), the church historian Jaroslav Pelikan observed that Jesus no longer belongs exclusively to the West. Christians in China, Japan, and Korea also call him Lord. But Jesus doesn’t belong exclusively to Christians either. At least in the United States, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Daoists love Jesus too. In a 1925 bestseller, the advertising mogul Bruce Barton called Jesus “The Man Nobody Knows.” Today he is the Man Nobody Hates.

THE JEWISH JESUS

The Jesus of American Jews takes his place inside this cacophony of American Jesuses. American Jews too have embraced Jesus as one of their own. Like Jefferson, they have created Jesus in their own image, quite apart from the constraints of the Christian tradition.

When I began my research on the Jesus of American Judaism, I expected to find a few books by Jews on Jesus and perhaps a dozen articles. What I discovered was that virtually every leading Reform rabbi between the mid-nineteenth century and World War II wrote either a book or a substantial article on Jesus. All agreed that Jesus was a Jew and not a Christian. All agreed, in fact, that Jesus was a great Jew. The only question seemed to be what kind of Jew Jesus was, and where he belonged in the Jewish pantheon. Was he above Amos but below Moses? Ahead of Jeremiah but behind Hillel? Isaac Mayer Wise, the father of Reform Judaism in the United States, called Jesus a Pharisee. Kaufmann Kohler, who would succeed Wise as the president of Hebrew

Union College, saw Jesus as an Essene. Others described Jesus as a prophet or, more simply, a rabbi. But all agreed (at least until World War II and the Holocaust) that Jesus was a great man. The writer John Cournos was the most effusive, describing Jesus as superior even to Moses—"the apex and acme of Jewish teaching."⁷ Rabbi H. G. Enelow of Temple Emanu-El in New York City called Jesus "the most fascinating figure in history."⁸ Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch, who edited the Reform Advocate, wrote that "The Jew, of whatever shade of opinion, is willing to acknowledge the charm, the beauty, the whole-souled perfection of the great prophet of Nazareth. ... He belongs to us; we have not rejected him."⁹

The context for this reclamation project was, of course, Christian missions to the Jews. "Why do you reject Jesus?" the Christians asked. To which these rabbis replied, "We don't." Or, to put it another way, while they rejected Jesus the messiah, they embraced Jesus the mensch.

Another context was Christian anti-Semitism, especially the ancient accusation that the Jews had killed Jesus. Not so, these rabbis insisted, laying the blame for Jesus' crucifixion squarely at the feet of the Romans. In fact, in a brilliant interpretive twist, they insisted that the Jews were a people of Christs, crucified time and time again by Christians. Or, as Rabbi Hirsch put it, "The thorny crown; who wears it? ... The lash, who felt it?" Not just Jesus but also the Jews. "We bore a cross, the weight of which was a thousand-fold heavier than that which Jesus carried to the place of his execution."¹⁰

TOXIC OR TONIC?

So what to make of this American Jesus? Was he, is he, good for the Jews? Has he been a toxic or a tonic? My assessment begins with this fact: that the United States, while legally secular, is as a matter of practice a profoundly religious nation. It is, more specifically, a "Jesus nation," a country in which people of all religious persuasions (and none at all) embrace Jesus as one of their own. To come to America is to be asked what you think of this man. To be a citizen is to weigh in (some way or another) on the central symbol of the Christian faith.

All this might sound like something of a downer to Jews in the audience. After all, this is supposed to be a secular country—right?—with a godless Constitution and a First Amendment that guarantees religious freedom and the separation of church and state. But neither the Constitution nor the Bill of Rights prevents Jesus from taking up residence in the hearts of American Christians. And neither prevents American Christians from transplanting him into the public square, where for more than two centuries Jesus has been a matter of urgent public debate among Christians and non-Christians alike.

The story of American Jewish responses to Jesus can be (and has been) read as a simple story of assimilation. Jews come as immigrants to the United States. Upon their

arrival, they realize that Americans are engaged in a national conversation about Jesus. So to fit in with their neighbors they start to talk about Jesus too. And not only that, they praise him to the heavens. They write novels such as Sholem Asch's *The Nazarene* (1939), which depicts Jesus as "a man of wonders" who is "a thousand times higher than a Rabbi," a faithful Jew who dies with blood clotting his earlocks and with the words of the Shema—"Hear o Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One"—on his lips,¹¹ all in a desperate attempt to assimilate, to curry the favor of one's Christian friends (or, at least, to deflect their antagonism).

The real story, it seems to me, is far more complicated (and more interesting). Christians have long had the power to put Jesus on the national agenda, to force Americans of all religions (and none) to answer the question posed in the Gospels: "Who do you say that I am?" But each of us is free to reckon with that question in our own way. And over the years Jews have done just that—with abandon. American Jews by no means simply adopted Christian understandings of Jesus as their own. In fact, they were so bold as to insist (as Jefferson had) that Jesus was not a Christian at all, which is to say they had the audacity to claim that Christians were dead wrong about the central symbol of their faith. Call that what you will. But to me it seems like chutzpah. And it is hard to see how such a stance could be expected to curry favor with one's Christian friends.

When it comes to Jesus and American Judaism, the key word is "reclamation." Jews did not accept Jesus on Christian terms. They "reclaimed" him on terms of their own—as a Prodigal Son of sorts who had strayed from the fold for a time but was returning now to the religion of his birth, life, and death.

In other words, what strikes me in surveying the long history of American Jewish responses to Jesus is not how assimilative but how audacious the Jews have been.

As I was preparing this lecture, I kept recalling a student of mine at Boston University. The course she had enrolled in was listed as "Topics in American Religion," but the specific topic had not been advertised in advance. When she arrived on the first day of class and I announced that the subject for the semester would be "Jesus in America," she was, to put it mildly, surprised. In her Orthodox Jewish household, one did not even utter so much as the name of Jesus, except perhaps by referring to "that man." And if one did even that one did so with deep disapprobation. Millions of Jews, after all, had been slaughtered in the name of Jesus, and not just during the Holocaust of World War II.

For some reason, this student stayed in the course, but our discussions disturbed her nonetheless, not least on the days we spent studying the writings of U.S. Reform rabbis. To this student, America's Jesus could not be good for the Jews. And any Jew who tried to "reclaim" him from Christianity was a traitor to the Jewish tradition.

Although I understand what this student was saying (and at least a bit of what she was feeling), I think she was wrong. What she missed was the subversive spirit of these reclaimers. The key question is this: Who gets to define Jesus? Orthodox Jews like this student allow Christians to define Jesus (as the Messiah, the Son of God who saves us from our sins, the founder of Christianity, etc.). They reserve for themselves only the right to reject (emphatically, I might add) the Jesus that Christians have presented to them. But this approach represents in my view a serious failure of the imagination. Why should Christians have a monopoly on representations of Jesus? Why indeed, say the Reform rabbis I studied.

For roughly a century, Reform rabbis in the United States have been insisting on the right to define Jesus for themselves. And for the most part they have decided that Jesus was a good Jewish boy with a nice Jewish mother. He was not the messiah. He was not God. He was not even the founder of Christianity. (That distinction, American Jews have argued, goes to the apostate Paul.)

Intriguingly, scholarship on the historical Jesus is finally coming around just to this view. In fact, one of the distinguishing marks of today's so-called "Third Quest" for the historical Jesus is its insistence on Jesus' Jewishness. Like America's Reform rabbis of roughly a century ago, this scholarship draws a sharp distinction between the religion of Jesus and the religion about Jesus, and places the blame for his crucifixion on the Romans rather than the Jews. It presents Jesus as an observant Jew, well versed in the Hebrew scriptures, inspired by the Hebrew prophets, and immersed in the sacrificial rites of the Temple in Jerusalem. In fact, at least to my eye, there is very little in recent scholarship on Jesus that was not said a century or more ago by America's Reform rabbis. All that has really been added are the polyglot footnotes.

This Jewish Jesus, it should be noted, has also made his way into American popular culture. On the covers of Time and Newsweek, and in Hollywood films, Jesus is gradually becoming more Jewish. (Regardless of what you think of Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ, its protagonist is plainly a Jew.) In fact, Jesus' Jewishness is so firmly ingrained today in the popular imagination that we even have jokes about it:

Q. How do you know that Jesus was Jewish?

A. He went into his father's business. He lived at home until he was 30. And his mother thought that he was God.

CONCLUSION

So is the American Jesus good for the Jews?

I am tempted to provide the stock academic answer: "yes and no." Obviously this is not a simple question, so perhaps it does not merit a simple answer. But I am going to avoid that temptation and try to be a bit bold myself. Yes, is my answer: The

American Jesus is good for the Jews.

The American Jesus is good for the Jews because he stands at the center of a national conversation in which people of all faiths (and none at all) are free to participate—a conversation in which Judaism, both past and present, is now front and center.

To talk about Jesus in the United States today is not necessarily to talk about Christianity, nor is it necessarily to promote it. In fact, Jesus is now one of the most powerful symbols available today for critiquing contemporary Christianity. Yes, some Christians appeal to Jesus in a simplistic fashion, asking “What would Jesus do?” and then crafting their answers simply to support their own behaviors—making Jesus, in other words, in their own evangelical or mainline Protestant or Catholic image. But it is now commonplace—thanks in no small measure to American Jewish thinkers—to distinguish between the religion of Jesus and the religion about Jesus. And Americans of all faiths routinely use that distinction to criticize the church. (This, it seems to me, is the meaning of the oft-cited observation that, were Jesus to return today, the last place you would find him is in the churches.)

Many Americans have been disturbed by the eruption of Jesus into American politics over the last couple decades, and particularly in the current administration. I confess to being concerned myself. Though I do not believe that the First Amendment mandates a “wall” of separation between church and state (in fact, I do not believe that such a wall can be constructed and, if constructed, I do not believe it would long stand), I have been disturbed to see the longstanding tradition in U.S. politics of vague appeals to Providence and the Absolute yield to more particular references to Jesus and Christ. Although roughly 85 percent of Americans are Christians, this is a religiously diverse country. And I know that some non-Christians feel put off by such public proclamations, as if they were by virtue of their faith second-class citizens.

What seems to complicate our analysis of this recent turn, however, is precisely the history I have been describing today—a history in which Jesus has gone beyond the confines of the churches and become not merely a Christian symbol but also a national icon. In some ways, Jesus has gone the way of Xeroxing and Band-Aids; he has become generic, no longer standing for one particular religion but for spirituality in general. Surely we have gone a long way in that direction when it comes to Christmas, which, thanks to (among other things) a series of Supreme Court rulings, is now more a national holiday than a Christian holy day. When it comes to Jesus, this process is by no means complete. If it were, conservative Christians would not rejoice as they do when they hear President Bush refer to Jesus as his Savior. But it is sufficiently advanced. In many respects, Christians have lost control over the central character in their collective narrative.

Even if you are disturbed (as I said I am) by the increased visibility of Jesus in

American political life, you need not be upset by our broader national conversation about the man. This conversation is good for the country, it seems to me, and good for American Jews, since it provides a platform on which all of us can discuss our faiths, our values, and our politics.

Let me add in conclusion that Jews have been good for the American Jesus. One of the problems with American representations of Jesus is the historical bugaboo of anachronism. Repeatedly Americans imagine a Jesus who could only have lived in Victorian America, or the 1960s, or today. American Jews, however, typically steer clear of anachronism when it comes to Jesus. Of all the representations of Jesus I have studied, theirs is the most historically accurate. As much as I am drawn to the Black Moses of the African-American churches, I know that Jesus did not look like Jesse Jackson or the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. But Jesus actually was Jewish. So Jews have a major contribution to make to our national conversation about Jesus, arguably at least as much as Christians. And happily they have been willing to do just that.

The fact that I was invited here today to participate in the Swig Judaic Studies Lecture Series (and the fact that you all have come) indicates that interest in Jesus among the Jews remains keen. That interest is, it seems to me, for the good—both for American Jews and for American culture.

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- ¹ Samuel Sandmel, "Isaac Mayer Wise's 'Jesus Himself,'" in *American Jewish Archives*, ed., *Essays in American Jewish History* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1975), p. 357.
 - ² Dickinson W. Adams, ed., *Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 403.
 - ³ Ibid., p. 330.
 - ⁴ Ibid., p. 410.
 - ⁵ Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 56.
 - ⁶ William G. McLoughlin Jr., *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 179.
 - ⁷ John Cournos, *An Open Letter to Jews and Christians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 12.
 - ⁸ H. G. Enelow, *A Jewish View of Jesus* (New York: Bloch, 1931), p. 181.
 - ⁹ Emil G. Hirsch, *The Doctrines of Jesus* (Chicago: Bloch and Newman, 1894), p. 28.
 - ¹⁰ Emil G. Hirsch, *The Jews and Jesus* (Chicago: Bloch and Newman, 1893), p. 26.
 - ¹¹ Sholem Asch, *The Nazarene* (trans. Maurice Samuel; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1939), pp. 471, 472, 685.

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